

Terrorisation at a hillside resort

Protect tourist interest by all means

FOR sometime past, Bandarban has been in the news for wrong, even sinister reasons. Sophisticated arms and ammunition were discovered from hideouts and there have been reports of abduction. Yet, what happened Monday night at Bandarban surpassed previous incidents by way of pooh-poohing law and order. A clandestine 'Arakanese Army' outfit kidnapped a resort hotel owner and demanded ransom of Tk 2 crore for his release. Apart from abducting Mahboob Bablu, the hotelier, the operatives took away money and credit cards from five foreign inmates.

That the resort is popular to overseas visitors is borne out by the occupancy status on the ill-fated night: 24 foreign tourists including Sri Lankans, Americans and Europeans were staying overnight. Nestled in an idyllic spot with the Shangu river flowing at the foothill, the scenic beauty of the hill resort is breathtaking. Evidently, its scenic beauty merely would not have drawn that many tourists to the hillside establishment, if it were not run efficiently.

This perhaps could be show-cased as a private sector tour operators' success. There must be other examples. Private sector is a natural choice of a stimulus for the growth of tourism, but the government has to give the right kind of physical infrastructure, fiscal incentives and security support to let a thousand flowers bloom there. When private sector tour operators carve a niche among local and foreign visitors with innovative, recreational and cost-effective products, they are not just boosting tourism, they are also helping the image of the country. Indeed, by comparison with government-sponsored tourism they have a greater potential to succeed with all the networking and groundbreaking they can do in a globalising world.

Incidentally, an event that went largely unreported related to botching up of some programmes for the new year's celebrations in a tourist resort town at the directive of the ministry concerned which was apparently prompted by some religion-based parties. Why was an intervention made to queer the pitch?

Tourism has become highly sensitive to any kind of negative signal, specially violence, in today's world. So, the best way for the government to promote it is to provide fool-proof security to tourist installations.

Tragedy at Makkah

Our condolences

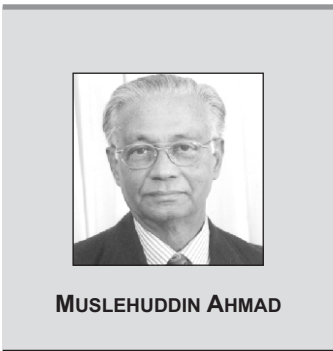
WE express our deepest condolences to the families and friends, not only of the Bangladeshi pilgrims, but also those from other Asian nations who lost their lives in a stampede in Makkah. This kind of tragic end to life is never expected, especially while one is far away from family and friends. Our hearts go out in sympathy for the bereaved families as well as for those who have been injured.

The Saudi authorities have announced 'overall plans' to modernise the holy cities of Makkah and Medina. It is a long-term perspective plan with a 20-year time-frame which should be welcomed for its projected comprehensive benefits. But on the scale of time, it is a long drawn-out scheme. But Eid comes ever year, so that millions of pilgrims will continue to throng the holy sites annually. It is our earnest hope that the essential precautionary steps will have been put in place before the next Eid-ul-Azha.

We know that it's a tall order, but meeting it will surely go along with the sentiments and expectations of the Muslims the world over. This was not the only time when such unfortunate loss of lives had taken place. Last year, fourteen pilgrims died during the same ritual while 35 lives were lost in 2001. Not to forget 118 people who died in 1998 with the worst accident being in 1990 when more than a thousand pilgrims were trampled to death or suffocated in a stampede in a tunnel in Mina.

With the exalted status the Saudi authorities have as the 'guardian of the holy places' and the host country, we are hopeful of an early comprehensive solution to the stampede-related casualties during Hajj.

Are the Americans well informed?



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

SOME weeks ago Mrs. Christine Wallich, Director of the World Bank, Dhaka Office reportedly said that 75 per cent of the US Congressmen do not have passports. This means that they never travelled beyond their borders and do not have first hand knowledge of the rest of the world. Though it's very unusual but it seems to be a fact. I had also an interesting experience some years ago when I was going to take a flight from Houston to Austin. While I was walking to board the aircraft, a tall gentleman, surely a Texan, was walking by my side. He could see that I was a foreigner and asked me -- "Where are you from?" I said -- Bangladesh. "Bangladesh! Where is it?" I thought he would at least know the name of India. I said -- south-eastern side of India. "Oh! Then you must be a communist". I said -- how right you are! Though his knowledge of geography was poor, that of history was fairly good. May be he fought in Vietnam or at least read in the newspaper about America's fight against communism in Vietnam. Anyway, it's not a big deal; everybody is not supposed to know everything. Even President Bush did not know the name of the President of an important country while he was campaigning for the White House. But the President of that country later became one of his best friends when Bush became President of the US and started fighting the Taliban.

The Congressmen are obviously responsible for making laws for their country but are also taking decisions on international affairs, which, more often than not, have very serious implications for other countries of the world. The very unfortunate examples are Afghanistan and Iraq. But as it seems, the people in responsible administrative positions provide wrong information to the people of America. This is what was clear from the recent remark of John Kerry, the Democratic front runner in the Presidential race. He said Bush Administration and Vice President Dick Cheney "ought to be held

utterly surprising that President of America was still telling wrong things to the Americans. Clearly the Americans are not well informed. Anyway, the President alone cannot be blamed. Those who provided the materials must be fully responsible for this.

Under heavy pressure from the senior politicians of the US Senate, President Bush has finally agreed to set up a bipartisan Commission to find out the truth. President Bush has also been lately saying that he would like to know the truth, but for the Iraqis and the world as a whole, it was already too late -- destruction

Hutton report as "whitewash", Blair cannot shrug off his huge responsibility for giving wrong information to the British people about the WMD and his assertion of 45 minutes. Where is Blair's "moral stand" now when there is no WMD "at all" in Iraq?

Of course, the Intelligence communities of Britain and America are responsible for proving the wrong information based on second or even third hand intelligence, but it was the duty of the Prime Minister of a country to have them doubly checked before giving out such wrong information with so robust

were mistakes in intelligence reports at both sides of the Atlantic. There are "special relationships" between Britain and America but it seems strange though that there is "special relationships" across the Atlantic even in making mistakes! This joint mistake should undoubtedly be taken note of by the Commissions on both sides of the Atlantic and it is likely that here the Commissions would detect some sort of political manoeuvring which Lord Hutton failed to detect.

In the World Social Forum that was held recently in Mumbai there were serious criticisms against

America have to give finger prints and face so much of embarrassing questioning at the entry point that many have started reducing their visits to America the land the people used to admire so much for its civil liberties, education, research, technology and what not. It's really sad.

The Human Rights Body has also given its views on Iraq invasion and said there was no reason for even "humanitarian intervention" Arundhati Roy said while speaking at WSF in Mumbai that Bush should suffer the same fate as Saddam has. Anyway, there is no power on earth to do this to Bush but the US itself and the world have to have the legal system to deal with such "arrogant" and "reckless" (the words of John Kerry about Bush) people so that no sovereign country and its people would ever face such disaster through unilateral military actions. Even a couple of days ago Dick Cheney said in the World Economic Forum in Davos that military action will be taken, if necessary, to establish democracy. Such statement really means democracy to be established through dictatorship. Which is more important? A particular variety of democracy or peace? From where does Dick Cheney get such abominable strength? It's the war machine that includes vast nuclear arsenal. This is why it is necessary to bring some balance in the stockpiles of world's war machines. Therefore, one does not see any justification for NPT giving unilateral advantage to only some countries. It is clear that if nuclear powers do not use nuclear bombs, nobody else would do it. The countries designated by President Bush as "axis of evil" and also others know that they will be finished if they first use n-bomb. So, let others have them and then the unilateralism will be over.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and presently the Vice Chancellor (designate) of Presidency University.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

It was rightly pointed out by a British Parliamentarian that there were mistakes in intelligence reports at both sides of the Atlantic. There are "special relationships" between Britain and America but it seems strange though that there is "special relationships" across the Atlantic even in making mistakes! This joint mistake should undoubtedly be taken note of by the Commissions on both sides of the Atlantic and it is likely that here the Commissions would detect some sort of political manoeuvring which Lord Hutton failed to detect.

accountable for using the weapons of mass destruction argument.... Dick Cheney and others in the administration misled the American people with respect to the true status of the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq."

Now the situation is very clear on Iraq's WMD. David Kay, the former US chief weapons Inspector, resigned saying - Iraq did not have any WMD which was the main basis for invasion of Iraq. Even in his State of the Union address President Bush asserted that "had we failed to act, the dictator's weapons of mass destruction programmes would continue to this day". While Bush was making assertions about the existence of WMD, Senator Kennedy was shaking his head clearly showing his disapproval. It was

of Iraq is complete and as it appears, the damage to the US Republican administration is also near complete. The Democrats will certainly take the political advantage out of it.

Here comes in the assertions of Prime Minister Blair of the UK that Iraq had not only WMD, but these could also be activated within 45 minutes. He also asserted in the Parliamentary Committee's hearing saying he had "no doubt at all" about Saddam's WMD. Prime Minister Blair also misled his nation. But the British people are better informed and this is why there were massive demonstrations in Britain against Iraq invasion. Though Lord Hutton has cleared Blair of any wrong doing on Davis Kelly's death (majority of the British people have termed

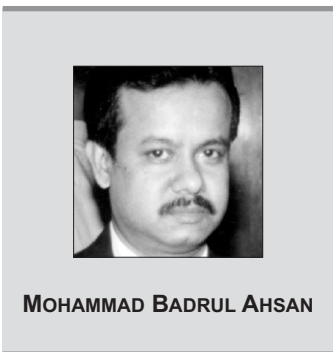
assertion to his people. It's not only informing his own people wrongly, he sent his army to invade a sovereign country and virtually destroy it. There have been demands from the lawmakers of Britain too for an independent inquiry on the way intelligence reports were prepared and used for the purpose of invading Iraq. Like Bush, Blair also had to agree to an independent inquiry.

Let there be parallel actions -- Saddam facing justice in Iraq (Saddam's trial must wait till a credible government is established in Iraq) and Bush, Blair and their associates facing independent inquiries under their legal systems. The truth must be established and no white wash or eye-wash.

It was rightly pointed out by a British Parliamentarian that there

Bush and America. One American participant, Kathleen Sheehan, felt so embarrassed that she said, "Sometimes I wanted to borrow one of those burqas and just cover my American face." So this is what Bush has given to the Americans. They even feel embarrassed to show their faces to the people of the world. Faces apart, American do not even appear to be safe any where in the world. Their embassies often remain closed for days in various parts of the world. Even within Americas the Red, Orange terror alerts are also common. The cancellation of flights across Atlantic is a very regular phenomenon that dislocates the programmes of the travelling people. The aircraft are required to carry even armed marshals during flights. The visitors to

Michael Jackson and Peter Pan



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LAST time I wrote about Michael Jackson, it was in a campus newspaper in the U.S. in 1994. Michael was accused of fondling a little boy for the first time and I defended him for a simple reason. We ought to be more careful to judge someone, who gave a great deal to the society, even if he ever acted to take something away from us. In my opinion, Michael Jackson had brought ecstasy to millions across the world, which outweighed the anguish he caused.

Perhaps I cannot say the same thing again, now that Michael Jackson is back in the dock to face charges for molesting another boy. It is hard to believe that one would be repeatedly accused of the same offense if it were only one's failure under an occasional temptation of the flesh. This time more people seem to be convinced that Michael is in the habit of doing hanky-panky with children and that he is guilty as charged. Personally I don't give a damn if that is true, although I wish he knew that adults were much

more fun.

But my admiration for Michael Jackson is not going to diminish. He is an entertainer, and his art is his reputation, reputation is not his art. We know him for his artistic ability, not for his moral austerity, and let us not mix the virtuoso with the virtuous. A French writer once wrote that Jean Genet was a bad thief because what he stole could not compare in value with what he left behind. Genet was a terrible freak. He was

right, one could also conclude that it has everything parents would never want in their worst nightmare.

Too bad some of Michael's repressed memories are coming back. By his account, his father was a terrible man, who used to beat him up with the belt and call him ugly for his knobby nose. We would agree it wasn't child psychology at its best. But then what happened to other things he experienced as a kid? What about his brothers, who used to sleep

accused of homosexuality at the height of his fame and sent to jail. He never regained his fame, and even adopted the name of Sebastian Melmoth to hide from his past.

Fame is like a sea, which, at the end of the day, returns some of the garbage thrown into it. Michael Jackson took his fame for granted and did strange things with it. People use money and fame to overcome hurdles, but the pop star continuously propped them higher around him.

CROSS TALK

In the story of Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up, a fairy drops dead every time a child is sad in Neverland. It now appears that quite a few children may have been sad in Michael Jackson's Neverland, and each time a fairy must have dropped dead somewhere in this 3000-acre California ranch. The Peter Pan, who lives there, has lost the fairies, which once used to bring him luck.

at once a supreme stylist in French literature and a homosexual, a wacko and a thief. Arrested repeatedly for thievery, he spent more than four years in jail.

If taken in the same light, Michael Jackson makes a pathetic case. The world treated him kindly when he was a kid and rose to his fame. It now appears that he took that success and used it to build a snare to systematically entice and abuse children. The Neverland, where Michael lives, is kind of a Hugh Hefnerian set up to seduce children. It has everything children would ever dream and, if the charges against the pop star prove

with girls in the same room with him, sometimes even in the same bed? How come that didn't affect him? Why couldn't he grow up to be a womaniser like rest of the pack?

Instead he has grown up to be a complete mess. He has gone through anti-aging chamber, numerous surgeries, several divorces, pigment transformation, and scandals. People also talk about his financial hardship, that he owes more than some eight billion dollars he owns. A great career that shook the world now seems shaky in its foundation. It has happened to other famous men before. Oscar Wilde comes to mind right away. He was

Long after he became a celebrity and one of the wealthiest performers in history, he started to worry about his complexion, his nose, face, things, which didn't matter.

He got married and divorced to prove his manhood. He fathered children to convince those who still doubted him. He even dangled his baby from hotel window to show the world that his claim was real. But nothing stood him in good stead in the end. Instead his image became more fuddled as he sank deeper into the crisis. He confined himself to the Neverland, started inviting more kids to stay with him, climbed trees on the compound, and basically

happiness. It's amazing how he liked all things childlike, yet every time got sucked into adult complexities.

We don't know if Michael ever realised that he hasn't always behaved in a normal way. He has produced children through surrogate mothers and his sperm cells. His children don't know their mothers, yet he wishes to give them normal life. He hides his children in masks to conceal their identity. When one of his children had a difficult birth, he ran home with the baby with placenta all over her, while the mother still stayed in the hospital.

We can judge Michael Jackson in

many ways. We can ignore his contribution to music and concentrate on the nasty thing he may have done. Or, we can ignore the silly aberration and focus on his gifted mind. We can even do both like the French do, holding together creative impulse with criminal instinct, while keeping them separate in praise and punishment. Marquise de Sade spent 27 years in jail for sordid crimes, yet he has been immortalised in French literature as a great writer.

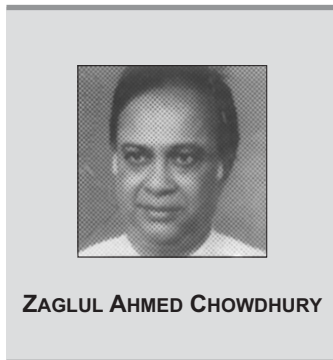
We can love Michael Jackson for his music and hate him for molesting the child, if he is found guilty. But how will Michael cope with the truth that he has bluffed the world? He told Martin Bashir during the interview that his dream was to adopt two kids from each continent around the world. He then said, "Like I said before, and I shall say it a million times: I am not afraid to say it. If there were no children on this Earth, if someone announced all kids were dead, I would jump off the balcony immediately. I'm done! I'm done!"

In the story of Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up, a fairy drops dead every time a child is sad in Neverland. It now appears that quite a few children may have been sad in Michael Jackson's Neverland, and each time a fairy must have dropped dead somewhere in this 3000-acre California ranch. The Peter Pan, who lives there, has lost the fairies, which once used to bring him luck.

Here is a lesson for the rest of us. Even fairies don't last unless one learns to grow up with time.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Sri Lanka: Is the peace process suffering big setbacks?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

F EARS continue to mount whether the truce between the government and the Tamil Tigers is increasingly becoming uncertain due to the stand off within the Lankan government and the impression being given by the Tigers that they are getting apprehensive about the fate of the ceasefire. The anxiety has been further heightened by a visit by a team of the political wing of the Tigers to peace broker Norway and several other countries to explain the position of the rebels on the current doubts centering on government-rebel dialogue and the possibility of the situation going back to the "square one", which, however, neither side wants. But the conditions may force a serious setback to the reconciliation efforts between the warring parties. "Peace" remains the avowed goal of all

concerned parties but the process of rapprochement launched two years ago now clearly hangs in the balance.

Six rounds of talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers over the last more than one year raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the contentious civil war in the south Asian island state which was virtually bleeding to white because of nearly two decades of bloodshed in the minority Tamils' armed struggle for a separate homeland in the north of the country. There was no decisive outcome of the civil war as the success in the battlefield swung from one side to the other and occasional ceasefire produced no tangible results and hostilities resumed in quick time. However, situation marked a qualitative change following the last parliamentary elections when the government of prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe took an active pro-peace policy with the rebels which facilitated a dialogue that went for several rounds in different venues abroad making some progress in the vexed problem.

While it will be a height of folly to expect easy resolution of the Sri Lankan civil war given the complexities involved in the issue, the dialogue has certainly given hopes since both sides made significant concessions. The government conceded to some demands of Tigers while the latter abandoned their main position -- an independ-

The situation has cast serious adverse impact on the peace process since Norway as the mediator has made it clear that it cannot play a role till such time that squabbling within the government is stopped. The Tigers are also wary that whatever progress made in the dialogue may be obviated since the President has gained greater control in the affairs of the country. Their skepticism about the peace talks is leading them to think that cessation of hostilities may not last and only fragile truce remain in force.

ent state for the Tamils, who constitute about 18 percent of country's population but are concentrated in the northern region. The road to peace through negotiations is undoubtedly bumpy but what was remarkably encouraging was the marked willingness to find common ground towards a permanent settlement of the problem. Notwithstanding differences on some key areas, both sides demonstrated commendable attitude in carrying forward the parleys. Admittedly, talks occasionally went into rough weather and even at one stage had been suspended indefinitely but no side never spoke of chances of resuming hostilities. They overcame the bottlenecks and agreed for next round of discussions.

Unfortunately, things turned bad in last November when president Chandrika Kumaratunga acted in a haste to dismiss three key ministers

of prime minister's government and herself took over the army and police, widening her rift with prime minister Wickramasinghe. Sri Lanka has a strange democracy which is seen as neither presidential nor parliamentary. The president has wide powers including that of sacking the elected government of the prime minister even if the incumbent enjoyed majority in the parliament. But, rather paradoxically, it is the prime minister and the cabinet that effectively runs the nation. This situation which is potentially dangerous to spawn conflicts between the President and Prime Minister did not affect the government before but proved near-suicidal now as the two top persons not only come from rival political platforms but are also chief political opponents.

Ranil lost the presidential election to Chandrika but the former later won the parliamentary polls

and thereby formed the new government. The problem, not surprisingly, began to grow and the co-habitation government somehow continued to function. But the stand off came to a head when President dismissed three ministers while the prime minister was away on a trip to the United States. This compounded the President-Prime Minister tussle on one hand and the fate of the peace process with the Tigers on the other. The United States, as the only superpower of the world, had earlier spoken in favour of territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and later expressed strong support for the peace efforts between the government and the Tamil militants.

The peace prospect has become uncertain because Chandrika is known as a hard liner in her approach against the Tamils and often accuses the prime minister of being soft to the rebels. Ranil defends his govern-

ment's stance, saying countrymen want a cessation of the bloodshed and he won the polls taking a pro-peace policy. Possibly, the president cannot relish a situation where her political rivals succeed in peace process whereas her People Alliance (PA) government earlier failed. As the political wrangling within the government exacerbated, the nation faced political uncertainty and future of the dialogue with the Tamils hung in the balance. Talks between Chandrika and Ranil made little headway and consequently peace process looked uncertain.

There is little sign that the President-Prime minister rift is on the wane. On the contrary, it has accentuated in certain areas. Ranil said the ball is in the court of the President, who needs to resolve the difference at least to an extent so that dialogue with the rebels can resume. He is insisting that the

President must restore the control of troops and police to his government, a demand Chandrika is unwilling to meet. As a result, problems persist while the prime minister has urged the president to resolve differences as early as possible. The president's Sri Lankan Freedom Party recently forged an alliance with the leftists to politically defeat the alliance of the prime minister and this has further worsened relations between the two dominant political platforms.

This situation has cast serious adverse impact on the peace process since Norway as the mediator has made it clear that it cannot play a role till such time that squabbling within the government is stopped. The Tigers are also wary that whatever progress made in the dialogue may be obviated since the President has gained greater control in the affairs of the country. Their skepticism about the peace talks is leading them to think that cessation of hostilities may not last and only fragile truce remain in force. The Tamil delegation led by its political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan is visiting Sweden, Germany, Italy and some other countries in addition to Norway who encourage and support peace in Sri Lanka. A main reason for the visit is to spell out their predicament in the current situation and problems with the Colombo authorities severely scuttling the peace process.

It will be a big misfortune if the Lankan government fails to settle

the differences, and a greater irony would be the hardening of the attitude of the rebels. The opportunity of peace that has been so assiduously nurtured must not be allowed to go in vain. It appears that the main responsibility lies with the president to act with wisdom and sagacity so that Sri Lanka avoids political instability and progress in peace endeavour with the Tamils does not return to a naught. The government said it has discovered a Tamil rebel "safehouse" in Colombo and swung into an offensive to detect militants in the capital. This has vitiated to an extent the otherwise reasonably good climate to negotiate with the militants, who feel the favourable atmosphere for peace is disappearing. However, none is still talking against peace. But fact remains that the environment is changing for the bad.

Any resumption of hostilities will only be a development of far reaching adverse consequences and all parties involved must take great care about an issue of paramount importance for the island state. Insecurity and instability in the country have a big bearing also in the overall South Asian scenario. Hopefully, leadership of the nation will act with prudence for much larger interest than individual and partisan considerations.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.